V2 no6

Unitarian Horizons

February 15, 1939

FOUR DAYS IN TEXAS

A TRAVELLING "denominational official" who spends only four days in Texas has to keep an alert mind very much on the job not to be completely swamped by the amazing variety of new impressions which crowd in upon him from every direction. But when the traveller is a Unitarian, it helps a lot to realize—as I did from the very first moment—that all the new

impressions are charged with hope and abounding enthusiasm for the Unitarian cause in this great Southwest. The plain fact is that Unitarianism in Texas is in the early stages of an unprecedented period of expansion, and even four days within the boundaries of the state gave me an unforgettable picture of thrilling possibilities, founded on achievements that are already of substantial proportions. I should like to be able to share that sense of new courage and faith with my fellow-Unitarians everywhere.

ONLY THREE CHURCHES

TO be sure, we have only three churches today in a state big enough, as the President of the Southwestern Conference said, "to include all of Germany and all of Italy, and still leave room enough to support all the Unitarians in the United States." But these three churches are veritable dynamos of Unitarian energy. I couldn't get to El Paso on this trip, but I saw enough of our minister there to realize how vigorous and forward-looking his church must be. I overheard him discussing plans for a "mission" with the Regional Director, and it was grand to see the sublime contempt which these Texans have for distances. Nine hundred miles mean less to these Unitarians, when it is a matter of coming to a regional conference or a religious education institute, than twenty miles mean to most of the

rest of us. The great sweep of the Texan plains will not tolerate a timid or provincial spirit in any man's soul. If you want to know what I mean, get a chance to talk to the Rotary Club in Houston, and listen to three hundred men sing —for your special benefit—"The eyes of Texas are upon you." The natural and inevitable result is that you make a better speech than you ever imagined you could!

HOUSTON AND DALLAS

WITH only four days at my disposal, I divided them equally between Houston and Dallas. In both cities I preached the installation sermon for the new minister, and in both cities I found, to my intense delight, the keenest interest in religious education. In Houston, I met with the Board of Trustees and the Church School Committee, to discuss ways and means of enlarging the parish house so as to accommodate a growing Church School. In Dallas, with only four months of work, they have a Church School of 28, a high school class of 16, and an adult class, that meets on a week-day night, of 20. Total, already enrolled in the educational program, 64. Foundations are not being neglected here, and planning for the future is wise and constructive.

But I think what gave me the greatest thrill was to find the laymen of both these churches eager for expansion of our cause in every possible way.

In Houston, they were talking about San Antonio, and Beaumont, and Corpus Christi. In Dallas, they were talking about Fort Worth and Waco. These laymen are thinking in terms of growth, within their own cities and far beyond. They want Unitarianism to become a powerful force in Texas, and they believe it can be done.

THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHWEST

THIS spirit is not confined to Texas. It permeates the Unitarians of the entire Southwest. In Dallas, the meetings of the new Southwestern Regional Conference of Unitarian Churches brought together representatives of all seven churches—seven churches that have the potential strength of seventy. There were many delegates from outside Dallas, and the Sunday morning congregation was the largest I have preached to for several months. Memphis, New Orleans, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and the three churches of Texas, all sent their ablest and most enthusiastic people—at least, I don't see how there could be any abler or more enthusiastic Unitarians than these delegates anywhere. The tone of the whole conference was strong and the note of steady confidence sounded over and over again.

In the sessions of the Conference there was again apparent the growing concern of Unitarians everywhere for religious education. Concretely,

the will of the delegates centered about a plan for a regional institute of religious education, to be held early in June; and the action taken by the conference will insure the fulfilment of their hopes, for the national body cannot possibly evade—even supposing it should want to, which is unthinkable—the challenge which has come to it from the Southwest. The best we have at headquarters will not be too good, and we shall be put upon our mettle to make it good enough.

WHY REGIONALISM?

NOW all this provides ample evidence, it seems to me, to justify the new emphasis upon regionalism within our Unitarian denomination. A year and a half ago, we embarked upon the policy of encouraging regional responsibility, largely on faith. Like Abraham, we went out not knowing whither we went. Some of us were convinced that the new emphasis was right, but we had precious little evidence on which to build that faith. Today, the picture is very different.

Of course, we are still in the early and experimental stages of the process. We have deliberately refused to move any faster than our experience, week by week, appeared to warrant, and our success has varied greatly in different sections, just as our methods have varied. We have tried to avoid any cut-and-dried scheme, believing that

variety and flexibility and adaptability are essential for any administrative program. We have not attempted to "cover the country" and we have refused to set up any final boundary lines or any official plan of regional organization.

But we have had measurable success already in several regions—not merely in developing a regional organization which can function in close co-operation with the national office, but in developing a new and promising spirit of regional consciousness that will in turn develop into an active spirit of Unitarian extension. Gradually we are improving the day by day working of our administrative machinery, though we still have a long way to go in this regard; but we are also making real headway in the direction of those more fundamental objectives which are far more important than any organizational details. These objectives may all be summed up by saying that what regionalism is meant to produce is a new era of aggressive Unitarian expansion.

THAT MEANS NEW CHURCHES

THE one best evidence of real expansion is new churches, and unless the development of regionalism means new churches it will fail in its main purpose. The history of the Unitarian denomination has convinced me that whenever the sense of regional responsibility has been strong it has led to the establishment of new

churches, and a week in the Southwest has convinced me that we may expect the same thing to happen again. I have mentioned my four days in Texas. Well, it took only two days to show me that Oklahoma is filled with the same spirit of new enthusiasm for the extension and expansion of our cause. Our church in Tulsa is alive and tingling with the missionary spirit, and you feel the same exhilarating temper in the church in Oklahoma City.

Regionalism is swinging into action in the Southwest, and that means new churches.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CHURCH

OVER and over again, as I go about the country, I listen to devoted Unitarians assure me in all seriousness, and with obvious expectation that I will immediately and whole-heartedly agree with them, that their church is the most important church in the entire fellowship. They told me that in Miami, and in Dallas, and in Oklahoma City. They told me that in place after place, during the last six weeks, and whenever I heard it I found my faith in the future of Unitarianism rising to new heights. Of course it's true! It's true wherever a Unitarian honestly believes it and feels the impulse to put his belief into words. And the thrilling thing is that it's becoming true in churches that not so

long ago were trembling on the verge of extinction.

What it all means is that our people—north and south, east and west—are awakening to the vital importance of our free faith in this time of wavering doubt and weary surrender to ancient forms of authority. They are beginning to see, with "due apprehension"—to borrow a phrase of Jonathan Edwards' that has recently been made to live again by Leslie Pennington—they are beginning to see with due apprehension that the positive faith which our free churches exist to promote is the one indispensable foundation for sane living today, the only basis for confident belief that the spirit of man shall yet work out its destiny on this planet to high and worthy ends.

F. M. E.

Volume II UNITARIAN HORIZONS Number 6

Published by The Beacon Press, Inc. on the fifteenth day of each month from September to June inclusive.

American Unitarian Association
25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.
Frederick M. Eliot, *President* Parker E. Marean, *Treasurer*

Printed in the U. S. A.